



Reading others

John Pearse and **Cliff Lansley** outline a psychological model for making sense of truth and lies

A successful coach or L&D practitioner needs to be able to accurately read the information or feedback given off by their coachee or learner in a variety of settings.

But how do you ensure that you capture all that is said or done so you can maximise the effectiveness of your support? After all, there are so many nuances in the spoken word: inflections, pitch and tone. Some people are incredibly expressive and revealing in their facial mannerisms, others less so, while others give off lots of information from their non-verbal activity – their body language.

Let's look first at the situations we face in L&D in which such insight might be useful. Imagine how valuable it would be for you to learn to recognise when someone is annoyed or cross with you. There

may be other times when learners are anxious about your training methodology but they seek to conceal their true thoughts and feelings because of embarrassment or, perhaps, lack of confidence.

This is a major obstacle to successful communication and particularly detrimental to a productive developmental relationship and achieving aims and objectives. The correct training can increase your ability to detect such deception and limit such avoidance behaviour in a variety of situations. For example:

- facilitating a team building event for a dysfunctional team
- offering feedback, as a line manager, on a difficult performance issue
- helping a coachee establish the reality around a goal he has set, during the early stages of an executive coaching session

- reading members of the group at a training session you are delivering to see if they are really engaged in your development process.

This article will dip into the world of emotional awareness and the science associated with examining truth and deception, revealing techniques that are now taught to specialist security staff at key airports around the world. Much of this work stems from the research findings of Dr Paul Ekman, who has distilled his life's work into two absorbing books *Emotions Revealed* and *Telling Lies*¹.

Let's start by considering the feedback signals to which we need to be attentive. These are transmitted *via* five communication channels:

- 1 Facial expressions** – movements of more than 40 muscles in the face that combine to signal actual emotions and cognitive processes. Work by Darwin and other 19th century scientists has been advanced by Ekman and others so that now we know that all humans, irrespective of ethnicity or culture, display seven universal emotions in the same way. In addition, under some circumstances, these emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, contempt and surprise) can be given off involuntarily in less than a fifth of a second, revealing a person's true feelings. Such fleeting images are referred to as *micro-expressions* and we can all learn to recognise them
- 2 Body language** – the non-verbal signals, other than facial, that can reveal what we are thinking and feeling. The research literature in relation to body language and deception is not straightforward and is heavily influenced by myths and cultural variables. Despite this, it can provide an illuminating insight into a person's thought processes and emotions
- 3 Voice** – the tone of which includes rhythm, speed, volume and pitch. Interestingly, the voice has in many respects become the dominant channel of communication. As a result, we can pay too much attention to this channel and fail to recognise what is taking place elsewhere
- 4 Verbal style** – the detail, structure, plausibility, contradictions and flow of the words we say. If we know how someone normally responds, and we know their baseline or normal operating behaviour, we can learn a great deal from any change from the baseline. While change from baseline applies to all five channels, it is particularly relevant in verbal style
- 5 Verbal content** – the words we say or write. Research in this area goes back many decades and continues to seek a language or composition that can discriminate between a credible and a non-credible statement by virtue of the fact that the

former is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the latter. This technique provides a language and structure to enable you to articulate what it is that you intuitively believe to be amiss, when otherwise your vocabulary would fail you.

Planning and preparation: contextual issues

All social interactions are fascinating engagements, exposing as they do myriad thoughts, beliefs, perceptions and countless emotions wrapped in the intricacy and unpredictability of language.

After all the psychometric tests have been completed, after recruitment agencies have exhausted their research into prospective candidates, the inevitable interview looms. Organisations need to see and hear the candidates: they seek some confirmation, some reassurance that can only be achieved from a personal interaction. Herein lays a paradox: why is it that, at the end of the interview process, many panel members comment 'he meets our criteria, but there was something about him that I can't quite put my finger on'?

This suggests that, intuitively, the interviewer 'thought' or 'felt' something was amiss but is now unable to articulate exactly what. Was the candidate being evasive or, indeed, deceptive?

So, whether your role is that of a coach, line manager or a group facilitator/trainer, there will always be a need to accurately interpret the communication signals that someone is giving off. This is especially the case where the stakes are high and the consequences important. This includes time and money. The emotional and financial cost for the learner, the coach/trainer and the organisation can be high; we should take care that any investment is based on the real development needs so that interventions will deliver real, lasting results as budgets get tighter for most of us into 2011.

So where do we start? As most development and coaching professionals will know, the first place to start with a learner or coachee is targeted planning and preparation. For our purposes, this represents the need to appreciate the overarching context, but can be condensed into the person and the situation:

- **With the person** we need to concentrate on the question of bias imported into the interaction, with priming mechanisms a classic example
- **With the situation** we need to address the coercive and intimidating environment that may greet the learner in a performance review, selection or learning environment.

Biases are widespread in our psychological makeup. We can react to labels we apply ourselves or hear from others – such as he is 'not a team player',





What is it that we see and hear from others that helps us believe they are being truthful?

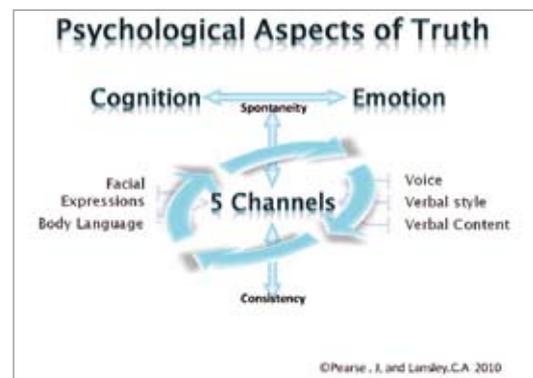
'ambitious' or 'bright'. We are bombarded with so much information on a daily basis that we can become *cognitive misers*. We may take short-cuts and we can be selective in what data we actually process; needless to say, such a selection process conforms to the previously held bias or beliefs².

So step one is preparing ourselves, which means being aware of, and managing, our own perceptions, biases and expectations.

A psychological model to make sense of truth and lies

To understand the communication signals that are given off in a coaching session or performance discussion, we must make sure we are working with real information from our learners/employees. So we must appreciate what the truth actually looks like. What is it that we see and hear from others that helps us believe they are being truthful?

Frequently, the responses suggest a form of seamless dialogue, perhaps 'harmony', 'openness' or 'congruency' may be the terms used. Everything is synchronised and spontaneous. There is a rhythm to be seen and heard and, what is more, it is the right rhythm – it flows. Such responses are right, though for our model we will use the term 'consistency'³.



We can use some of the vast research into human memory to help us further. We know that, in recalling a true event, the speaker can, with some ease, provide appropriate details of the event, especially if asked to recall a personal memory or important incident. Indeed, he will often spontaneously introduce some other details prompted by reconstructing the event.

The two domains – *cognition* and *emotion* – are in harmony, there is no conflict. In essence, what is being said, how it is being said, the emotions displayed on the face and the accompanying body language are all synchronised – they are consistent.

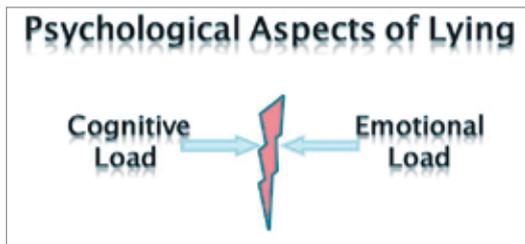
The challenge is whether we can pick up all this information, from all these channels, while preparing the next question.

The good news is that we are all hotwired to receive and interpret this data and that, with training and practise, we can become very skilled indeed. This represents part of our evolutionary heritage – it pays to be able to interpret all these signals.

The bad news is that there is no single indicator of deception, there is no *Pinocchio's nose*, so we must work hard at focusing on all that is taking place. We need to develop acute observation, and active listening, skills – the ideal operating theatre for coaches and development professions. The coach,

unless meeting him for the first time, will already be aware of a client's normal operating behaviour – the baseline. This is an important feature because, dependent on the situation or context, this may change and we will need to recognise this change and identify why it occurred.

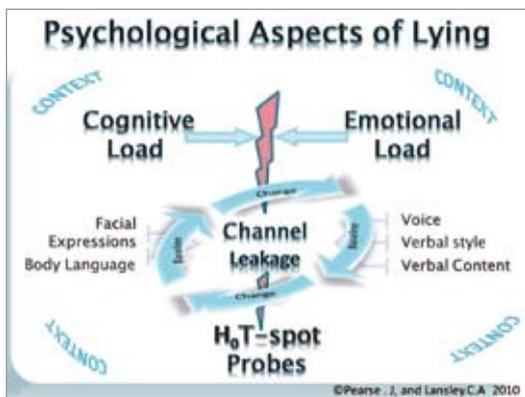
Psychological aspects of lying



The relationship between cognition and emotion is a key feature of our model for both truth and lies but there are key differences between them – consider, for example, what happens in a lie? We know in truth there is harmony but in a lie, they are more likely to clash – to clash – literally, a competition for resources.

Brain scans reveal that telling the truth activates the middle brain while lying lights up the limbic lobes and requires more energy, ie it needs more oxygen from the blood. You have to work harder when you are lying – you have to remember more and, the more important the occasion, the higher the stakes and, the more serious the consequences, the more likely something will leak out.

This increases the chances that we will be presented with some inconsistency between what is being said and what emotion is displayed on the face, or what is said and the accompanying body language – a Freudian slip perhaps.



When we come across such inconsistency, it is most unwise to instantly label it a lie or deception because, at this stage, we do not have ground truth. Instead, it is safer to simply label this clash a 'H₀t-Spot'⁴ – important information that needs to be

References

- 1 Ekman P *Telling Lies: Clues to deceit in the marketplace, politics and marriage* (3rd edition) W Norton (2009); *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing faces and feelings to improve communication and emotional life* Henry Holt and Company (2003)
- 2 Gladwell M *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking* Little, Brown (2005)
- 3 This terminology is also adopted by judges, lawyers, arbitrators and psychologists undertaking risk assessments and clinical analysis.
- 4 Ho is the symbol used in empirical research and literature to represent the term 'hypothesis' and we are using it here as a visual stimulus to ensure exactly that – that other options are researched.

researched further, that demands more detailed examination, often by subtle and skilled questioning.

We mentioned earlier that we are all cognitive misers – looking for ways to reduce the cognitive demands made on us daily – and we often rush to judgment when we see or hear something like a H₀t-Spot. Why? Because it is mentally less taxing.

One of the disciplines inherent in this area of training is that we must resist this rush to judgment and, instead, implement a filtering process that includes collecting the data, considering and analysing it and, then and only then, reaching a conclusion. This also happens to be a sure-fire way of keeping an open mind.

The most appropriate way to unravel a H₀t-Spot to help develop a deeper understanding of the learner or coachee is by probing – asking relevant and, if necessary, intrusive questions to test the hypotheses you are exploring. The terminology in this article has remained faithful to the original Ekman philosophy; he first aligned the terms "H₀t-Spot", "leakage", "cognitive load" and "emotional load" to deception in his book *Telling Lies* and subsequent publications.

Conclusion

So, when people set out to be deceptive, it matters what they are thinking and feeling because, if these two domains compete for resources, there is likely to be visible or audible signs of leakage – a H₀t-Spot. This indicates important information that may need to be further examined by questioning.

It would be most unwise to immediately assume that someone is lying. Rather, you need to consider alternative hypotheses before reaching a judgment. This ensures you maintain an open mind and will contribute to a more meaningful and effective relationship with your learner or coachee.

We are now extending Ekman's science into the L&D sector through pilot work early in 2011, and we are keen to hear from organisations and individuals who would like to take part. **TJ**

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